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**Center on Education Policy
Roundtable Discussion on No Child Left Behind Act
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Problem Statement

The No Child Left Behind Act requires all teachers to be ‘highly qualified’. The Act defines ‘highly qualified’ as holding at least a bachelor’s degree, having full state certification, and having demonstrated subject matter knowledge. In addition, the Act requires states to report on inequities in the distribution of teachers between high- and low-poverty schools and requires states and districts to develop plans to level the playing field.

The Act’s teacher quality provisions have several major shortcomings:

- (1) There is no requirement or support to ensure that ‘highly qualified’ teachers are highly effective in contributing to student achievement.
- (2) The ‘highly qualified’ definition itself ignores the research evidence that cites the importance of pedagogical skills in addition to content knowledge in determining teacher efficacy.
- (3) There is little focus on retention as a fundamental challenge that drives the inequitable distribution of teachers.
- (4) The tremendous influence of school leadership and working conditions on the decisions of teachers to stay, leave, or take a job in the first place is not addressed by the Act.

Fundamentally, the Act’s definition of a highly qualified teacher is too narrow. Certification and subject matter knowledge are just the starting point for becoming a highly effective teacher. Research suggests that pedagogy has a significant role to play as well. Certainly not all ‘highly qualified’ teachers are equally effective. In reality, there are many shades of gray between the stark black and white of the Act’s highly qualified definition. In that sense, the ‘highly qualified’ definition provides little information about varying degrees of teaching effectiveness. While it does serve as a minimum requirement to keep the extremely ill-prepared out of teaching, it fails to provide an impetus to drive improvements in teaching where it matters most: in the classroom.

In addition, the Act does little to acknowledge that teacher distribution is impacted by a wide variety of factors, including labor markets, school leadership, and working conditions. Further, the Act’s accountability provisions—the labeling and sanctioning of under-performing schools and districts—could well exacerbate the existing challenge of attracting and retaining quality educators in hard-to-staff schools.

The Act’s teacher distribution requirements are emasculated by the failure to place any emphasis on teacher retention. Distribution and retention are related; they are not distinct problems with distinct solutions. While high-poverty, urban, low-performing schools and districts certainly face significantly greater teacher recruitment challenges, astronomical turnover rates worsen the situation. As these systems shed teachers,

overall teaching quality falls, certified teachers are replaced by emergency credentialed or out-of-field substitutes, student learning suffers, those schools are more likely to be sanctioned under the Act, and next year's recruitment challenge becomes much more daunting. It is a vicious cycle. A greater focus on developing beginning teachers and improving their working conditions would lead to improved retention which, in turn, would result in a less inequitable distribution of teachers over time.

Policy Recommendations

In the reauthorization of the No Child Left Behind Act, federal policymakers should consider the following recommendations to strengthen the teacher distribution provisions in the Act:

- 1. Alter and/or restrict the allowable uses of Title II funds by placing a greater emphasis on strategies that impact teacher retention, including high-quality induction and mentoring.** Currently, few Title II dollars are directed toward teacher retention in high-need schools and districts; rather most Title II monies are spent on recruitment and training strategies (such as signing bonuses and self-directed professional development) that do little to impact the inequitable distribution of teachers or improve overall teaching quality.
- 2. Create a New Teacher Fund within the Act.** If teacher quality truly is the principal driver of student achievement then we must do more to ensure that it exists for every single child. The New Teacher Fund could help to support reduced course loads for novice teachers or pay for full-time mentors, among other uses. If necessary, the Fund could be targeted at novice educators employed in hard-to-staff or low-performing schools.
- 3. Provide incentives aimed at improving the quality of leadership in hard-to-staff schools: (a) Require districts to use a specific percentage of Title II funds on leadership professional development; and (b) create incentives for the creation of leadership pipeline and principal induction programs.** The presence of supportive leadership and good working conditions are major factors in why teachers decide to remain at or leave individual schools. Principals have a great need for quality professional development around effective supervision of instructional practice. Principals of hard-to-staff schools are disproportionately new and there is a growing shortage of qualified and experienced principals.
- 4. Provide funding under Title II for states and districts to build data infrastructure and management systems focused on teachers and teaching quality.** With this funding, strengthen reporting requirements for states and districts about the distribution of highly qualified teachers between as well as within districts. Require data collection and reporting about a broader set of qualifications and characteristics of teachers (e.g., preparation, years of experience, induction experience, impact on student achievement) to inform scientifically-based research about what constitutes highly effective instruction and the overall relationship between teacher quality and student learning.